St. Johns Bayou SEIS notice of completion appears in Federal Register

By Liz Anderson

Well, it took us awhile Friday to find it, and after looking and looking through list after list on the Federal Register online website, almost beginning to panic, FINALLY, there it was on the web.

The notice of completion of the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the St. Johns Bayou, New Madrid Floodway flood control project.

It wasn't even at the top of the list, but sandwiched way down between the Draft Supplemental EIS for a project in Marin County, CA and the Final EIS on another project in Contra Costa, Marin and Solano Counties, CA.

This is what it looked like under ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY [ER-FRL-6631-2]; Environmental Impact Statements; Notice of Availability:

"EIS No. 020303, Final Supplement, COE, MO, St. Johns Bayou and New Madrid Floodway Project, Channel Enlargement and Improvement, Revised Information to Formulate and Analyze Additional Alternatives, Flood Control and National Economic Development (NED), New Madrid, Mississippi and Scott Counties, MO, Wait Period Ends: August 19, 2002, Contact: Shawn Phillips (901) 544-3321."

Isn't it absolutely B-E-A-U-T-I-F-U-L? After all this time.

As of late Tuesday afternoon there hasn't been a huge environmental uproar out of the *Washington Post* or the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* but the lead story in the *Southeast Missourian* in Cape Girardeau Sunday, taking up three-fourths of the front page and much of Page 5, was about the St. Johns project, complete with a number of photographs of local people.

Two "environmentalists" are quoted in the story, Dr. Susan Flader, president of the Missouri Parks Association, and a history professor at the University of Missouri, and Dr. Bill Eddleman, a biology professor at Southeast Missouri State University who is also president of the Four Seasons Audubon Society.

Dr. Flader's comments were insulting to the project, saying that "The project is an insult to the environment," without going into detail, and that the study does not address concerns about the water quality at the park (Big Oak Tree State Park) due to the use of chemicals on nearby crops.

We don't believe Dr. Flader has read the report because it goes into great detail about water quality everywhere. And if she is concerned about chemicals from nearby crops getting into the park, she should be concerned about chemicals in the backwater.

They really get there in the waves of the backwater.

Dr. Eddleman is more specific, in his concerns. According to the article by Sam Blackwell, he said that "least terns, an endangered species that now come into the backwaters to forage, would be adversely affected by the project."

LEAST TERNS

According to the Corps' response in the Final SEIS to the Webster Groves Nature Study Society, "When the interior population of the least tern was proposed as endangered in 1984, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) indicated that the entire interior population was estimated at 1,250 adults.

"Also, their range on the lower Mississippi River was thought to be only from Cairo, Ill., to Osceola, Ark., with 650 adults in the population.

"Surveys by the Corps from 1986 through 1989 revealed 2,000 to 2,350 adult least terns on 570 miles of river from Cape Girardeau, to Greenville, Miss.

"The 1990 Recovery Plan stated that, "Current number of adult birds (2,200-2,500) on the Lower Mississippi River will remain stable for the next ten years...."

"Population surveys along this route from 1990 through 2001 revealed population counts greater than 5,000 for seven of those years, and greater than 6,100 for four of those years.

"The 1995 survey reported 6,971 adult least terns in the lower Mississippi River. This high population far exceeds the Recovery Plan goal.

"According to a USFWS survey summary report, the surveys by the Corps reveal that about 75% of the total interior least tern population is found in the lower Mississippi River.

"Thus it can be concluded from these survey numbers that a healthy and stable least tern population exists in the lower Mississippi River...

"The report the commentator cites by Dr. Dugger dealt only with several sand bars within the Missouri section of the river. Neither Dr. Dugger's study, nor others, looked at the entire breeding range and population.

"To fully assess impacts of the St. Johns project, one must look at the entire least tern population over the entire 570 mile breeding range on the lower river.

"One can not say, nor infer, that reducing the numbers of forage fish that periodically enter the Mississippi River near three local least tern nesting sandbars downstream from the project site will result in significant negative impacts when the data do not support this conclusion.

"Also, the additional gate operations proposed in this draft SEIS could provide for ponded water in low water years up until May 15 every year, thus providing a potential fishery rearing area, and subsequent forage area for the migratory terns, that would otherwise not be available in the project area in low water years.

"The Biological Assessment (BA) presented data that the frequent 40 foot difference between high and low river stages maintains many areas of large, isolated, bare sandbar habitat that is very conducive to least tern nesting.

"The BA also concluded that more nesting habitat potentially exists than what is actually used by least terns.

"In addition, no critical nesting habitat has been determined by the USFWS. Therefore one can conclude that sandbars are not rare nesting habitat for the interior least tern on the lower Mississippi River.

"One of the nearby sandbars of concern has actually significantly increased in size....

"The dense population of small, juvenile fish that occur in the New Madrid Floodway do enter the Mississippi River and provide easy prey for the least terns using the three nearby nesting colony sites.

"However, this does not occur every year. There is no drastic or critical decline in overall least tern population numbers during years when the Floodway is not inundated.

"Spring fishery data collected from the Floodway specifically for the St. Johns project, revealed that gizzard shad comprise the vast majority of juvenile fish exiting the Floodway with the spring floodwaters.

"Gizzard shad are mobile and found in the Mississippi River by the millions, so it reasonable to conclude that any slight reduction in juvenile gizzard shad numbers at one tributary point in the river system will have minimal impact on the entire least tern population.

"It should be noted that the three most recent population survey numbers were 6,000 or more. These were years when no spring inundation occurred in the Floodway. (Emphasis added.)

"Least terns fly 2.5 miles or more from the nest to forage in different river habitats ranging from calm backwater chutes to swifter currents along the outside bend revetted river bank.

"They are opportunistic feeders and will fly to wherever foraging is most productive.

"Least tern do not appear to be species specific with regard to their prey.

"About 12 different fish species have been found on the sand at least tern nesting sandbars during Corps surveys. The vast majority of fish found were gizzard shad.

"The two most important criteria for prey appeared to be the size of the prey and its ease of capture.

"If receding floodwaters coming out of the Floodway provide abundant juvenile fish that are closer to the three nearby nesting colonies, the terns will fish there. If not, they will forage at greater distances.

"Or they could forage within the ponded reaches in the bottom of the Floodway during low river stage years.

"Any slight reduction in forage fish in this local reach of the river during low river stage years does not adversely impact the overall least tern population numbers.

"The three nearby colonies have been used for many years. The least tern has been nesting on the lower Mississippi River for at least 10,000 years.

"The terns are aware of what specific energy reserves are required for successful nesting. This is illustrated by the recent survey data.

"This project will not eliminate spring inundation, merely the inundation that is high enough to cause impacts to infrastructure and agriculture.

"Therefore, the Corps concludes that any reduction of forage fish leaving the Floodway will not adversely impact the overall least tern population.

"The isolated nesting sandbars, great distances between nests and the water, and the lack of cover, preclude most predation on least terns.

"Predation occurs primarily from great blue heron, great horned owl, Mississippi kite, and occasionally coyote.

"Predation on least tern young does not dramatically increase on the three nearby colony sandbars during those low water years when forage fish leaving the Floodway are reduced or non-existent, and the adult terns must fly a greater distance to forage.

"However, should this occur, the overall population would likely recover this year-class at these colonies the next time the Floodway is inundated.

"It must be pointed out that the least tern can live 12 or more years, and a slight year-class reduction one year is recovered in another year.

"Moreover, the Mississippi River kills more least tern chicks and adversely affects the entire population whenever a river rise inundates nesting colonies than what could occur from a slight reduction in forage fish entering the river from a nearby stream during high river stages.

"Summarizing, one can not conclude that any reduction in forage fish leaving the Floodway will leave the colony so vulnerable that any loss in that year-class will significantly adversely impact the overall least tern population in the lower Mississippi River.

"The population survey data for the past 16 years do not support this conclusion."

In the *Southeast Missourian* article, Dr. Eddleman is quoted by Blackwell as saying a scientist at Southern Illinois University claims the project would wipe out a whole species of white bass.

Both the USFWS and the Corps agree on the white bass situation as we wrote last week.

White bass have no business spawning in soybean fields inside the floodway.

Their spawning habitat is riverine gravel beds.

The *Southeast Missourian* article said in several places that the fate of the St. Johns Bayou-New Madrid Floodway flood control project may "be decided in the courts", although it did not say who is talking about taking us to court over it.

Those involved in the study process fully expect to be taken to court. But we can't get there until we passed this hurdle. The final study had to be released. It now has been released.

Federal agencies don't necessarily have to agree on the merits of a project. Law demands that the NEPA process be followed.

The Corps of Engineers has scrupulously followed the NEPA process throughout this study. It has been the EPA and Fish and Wildlife Service that have consistently sought extensions, delays and further delays.

Construction of this project will do more for the overall environmental health of the Bootheel of Missouri than anything we can imagine. It will do more for wildlife locally than anything else possibly could.

It calls for the reforestation of more than 8,300 acres of cropland. Picture that and compare it with the size of Big Oak Tree State Park - 1,008 acres!